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Review of *Producing Sovereignty: The Rise of Indigenous Media in Canada* by Karrmen Crey (University of Minnesota Press)

by Meghan Hipple | Book Reviews, Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT Karrmen Crey's *Producing Sovereignty* explores the rise of Indigenous media in Canada since the 1990s, focusing on the intersection of cultural production, institutional influence, and Indigenous sovereignty. Using documentary and non-fiction films as case studies, Crey examines how Indigenous creators navigate and challenge colonial structures, using media as a tool for asserting identity and autonomy.

KEYWORDS Indigenous peoples, art, documentary, institutions, new media, sovereignty

Producing Sovereignty: The Rise of Indigenous Media in Canada. By Karrmen Crey. University of Minnesota Press, 2024, 224 pp. (paperback). ISBN 9781517914509. US List $27.

In *Producing Sovereignty: The Rise of Indigenous Media in Canada*, Karrmen Crey (Sto:lo and a member of the Cheam Band) explores the surge of media created by Indigenous people across Canada over the last three decades. She examines the social, political, and technological factors that have contributed to this rise, placing her argument within the broader historical and political landscape of Canada at the time. Beginning with an explanation of the 1982 patriation of the Canadian Constitution and the inclusion of Section 35, which acknowledged

Indigenous rights, Crey reminds us that despite this legal enshrinement of rights, the broader struggle for true Indigenous self-determination continues.

The 1990s marked a significant period of support for Indigenous cultural production, helping to lay the groundwork for what Crey describes as cultural and visual sovereignty. Drawing on minoritarian media studies, she references scholars like Chon A. Noriega and Jun Okada, who have examined the politics of identity-based cinemas. Crey uses institutional analysis to challenge discourses of exclusion and misrepresentation. The discursive approaches that Crey challenges often reduce analysis of Indigenous-produced media to the margins of mainstream media. Instead, she argues for a framework that focuses on the institutional context of creation, offering insights into the negotiations between Indigenous media practitioners and the sites of production that have shaped their work. While others have explored the role of institutions in the development of Indigenous media, Crey broadens that discussion to include sites like the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, provincial broadcasters, independent television production companies, and postsecondary programs. Each chapter of her book serves as a case study, examining the institutions and non-fiction media forms that have played a role in the production of Indigenous visual sovereignty from across Canada and, in one instance, within the US university system.

In chapter one, Crey focuses on Doug Cuthand (Cree, Little Pine First Nation), a prominent filmmaker whose expansive career has received little attention. Through this exploration of Cuthand's work from journalist to documentarian, Crey explains how Indigenous media producers create work that is simultaneously institutionally funded and critical of the Canadian nation-state. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, she reveals how state authority can seek to manage social and ideological disruptions through the performance of accommodation. Yet Crey argues that the influence of national cultural policy on Indigenous media production is not monolithic, taking on different meanings

depending on their interpretation and implementation within various institutional contexts.

In chapter two, Crey explores the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance and the group's collaboration with the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. Indigenous creators involved in this collaboration produced a series of public service announcements about self-government that Crey interprets as acts of resistance that carved out an Indigenous public sphere distinct from the dominant, colonial one.

Chapter three continues this exploration by looking at television networks and reality TV as sites where Indigenous sovereignty is negotiated. Crey's analysis of the funding mechanisms behind Indigenous media production, particularly the Canada Media Fund reveals the complexities of media production in Canada. Her detailed tracing of elusive funding streams, bureaucratic hierarchies, and organizational strategies is one of many standout aspects of her research, offering a valuable resource for anyone interested in the intersections of media production, policy, and implementation. Using textual analysis, Crey examines how the reality show *Indians + Aliens* communicates Indigenous cosmologies to a broad national audience, revealing the relationship between independent Indigenous productions and industry trends in broadcast TV.

Chapter four, "Indigenous Documentaries and Academic Research Institutions," compares two documentary films: *Navajo Talking Pictures* (1984) created by Arlene Bowman (Diné) at the University of California, Los Angeles, and *Crying Rock* (2010) by Banchi Hanuse (Nuxalk) at the University of British Columbia. Through institutional analysis, Crey argues that examining the context of production for both films raises important questions about how postsecondary training informs material and thematic representation. Ultimately, she seeks to understand how filmmakers develop their craft through the interplay of theory and practice in institutionalized academic settings. This chapter offers a concise

methodology for engaging with the role of academic theory and practice in contemporary media ecologies. Instead of viewing academia solely as an interpreter or critic, Crey examines its elliptical nature as both a starting and ending point in media production.

The final chapter addresses digital media, specifically virtual reality, and how Indigenous creators use technology to challenge colonial narratives and assert sovereignty. Crey discusses the 360-degree immersive documentary *Highway of Tears* (2016), which addresses the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). In this chapter, Crey critiques not only the Canadian government's inadequate response to the MMIWG crisis but also the discourse around virtual reality that frames it as an "empathy machine." Crey argues that because of the history and practices of ethnographic filmmaking, which claimed unfettered access to Indigenous experiences for non-Indigenous audiences, the immersive nature of *Highway of Tears* cannot produce empathy only discomfort. The nearness of audience members to Indigenous trauma turns the position of the viewer from passive spectator into active witness. *Producing Sovereignty* offers critical insights into the ongoing struggles and triumphs of Indigenous cultural production. However, as Crey makes clear, her book is not meant to be representative of all Indigenous media created in Canada and beyond. This book represents only a small fraction of media, specifically, documentary media—and there are many more Indigenous-made documentaries and institutions worth examining. Crey's work emphasizes the agency of Indigenous media practitioners. Despite institutional constraints, Indigenous artists have used media to assert their sovereignty, challenge colonial narratives, and create spaces for Indigenous perspectives. This agency is evident in the diverse and vibrant body of Indigenous media that has emerged in Canada over the past three decades. Through meticulous research and thoughtful analysis, Crey bolsters our understanding of Indigenous sovereignty and the power of media as a tool for cultural and political expression.

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